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Feature Article - Early Tasmanian settlements

THE FIRST SETTLEMENT AT RISDON (1803)

The original explorers of Tasmania (including the French) had largely concentrated their attention on the south-east and, in particular, on the sea approaches to the Derwent. Faced with the necessity for establishing a settlement to assert British sovereignty, Governor King had a number of possible sites to consider, including King Island, Port Phillip and Port Dalrymple (the Tamar Estuary). His eventual choice was the area of the Derwent and he reported his intention to the Admiralty as follows:

'My reasons for making this settlement are the necessity there appears of preventing the French gaining a footing on the east side of these islands; to divide the convicts; to secure another place for obtaining timber with any other natural productions that may be discovered and found useful; the advantages that may be expected by raising grain; and to promote the seal fishery.'

Commissioned to make the Derwent settlement, Lieutenant John Bowen sailed from Sydney with the Albion and Lady Nelson; both were at anchor at Risdon by 11 September 1803 when Bowen went ashore. The slenderness of Governor King's resources is apparent from the fact that the settlers-free, convict and military-numbered only 49, and that the Albion was a British whaler under temporary charter.

The responsibility for the choice of the Risdon site attaches ultimately to Bass who had made detailed investigations of the Derwent in 1798 from the Norfolk. He had reported as follows:

'The land at the head of Risdon Creek, on the east side, seems preferable to any other on the banks of the Derwent'.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Bowen's commission from Governor King directed him to locate the new settlement in the Risdon area. In actual fact, the site proved unsuitable due to the inadequate stream and the poor landing place; these handicaps were aggravated by the wretchedness of the people at Bowen's disposal.

On 9 August 1804, the Ocean sailed for Port Jackson with Lieutenant Bowen and most of his people; Lieutenant-Governor Collins at the new settlement at Hobart had decided to close down the Risdon camp and retain only thirteen convicts and one free settler.

SETTLEMENT AT SULLIVANS COVE (1804)

Lieutenant-Colonel David Collins was ordered to establish a settlement on Port Phillip Bay to secure the strategic Bass Strait for the British. However, he was unhappy with that locality and decided to transfer the settlement to the Derwent River because of its reputation as a safe harbour and the fact that Risdon had already been settled.

On 15 February 1804, Collins, with the first detachment from Port Phillip in the Ocean and Lady

Nelson, anchored off the new settlement at Risdon. A quick inspection satisfied him that the site was quite unsuitable and he made his own reconnaissance, eventually selecting the area on the western bank known as Sullivans Cove and ordering that the expedition should be disembarked with all its stores in the vicinity of Hunters Island. Collins had selected gentle slopes for his settlement, located a fine stream running from Mt Wellington and found, near the mouth of the stream, an anchorage which would accept the draught of any vessel of his day (or of the modern era).

The strength of the colony was increased to 433 people in June 1804 when the Ocean returned from Port Phillip, where it had taken aboard the balance of the original expedition. From the camp on Sullivans Cove, the city of Hobart has grown.

NUMBER VICTUALLED AT SULLIVAN'S COVE, 26 FEBRUARY 1804(a)

	Men	Women	Children
Military establishment	26	1	..
Civil establishment	6
Settlers	13	5	13
Convicts	178	9	8
Other(b)	3
Total	226	15	21

.. not applicable

(a) Excludes details of the Risdon camp.

(b) Including one Aboriginal person from Port Jackson.

SETTLEMENT ON THE TAMAR (1804)

While David Collins was still in Port Phillip Bay, wondering where to settle, he sent his namesake, William Collins, on a voyage of exploration to the Tamar estuary. By the time William Collins returned with good reports of the Tamar for settlement, David Collins was preparing for the expedition to the Derwent.

A short while later, Governor King received a despatch from Lord Hobart (Secretary of State for the Colonies) which recommended the establishment at Port Dalrymple. Lieutenant-Colonel William Paterson was nominated as Lieutenant-Governor of the new colony. After a first attempt was forced back by adverse winds, the party of 181 soldiers and convicts in four ships arrived at Outer Cove (George Town) on 4 November 1804.

Although he penetrated as far as the fertile site of Launceston, Paterson made the decision to set up his headquarters at the head of West Arm and founded York Town, while still maintaining small establishments at Outer Cove, Low Head and Green Island. In deciding on York Town, one can only imagine that Paterson was guided purely by the strategic necessity, as was Collins at Sorrento, of being near Bass Strait, and that he gave little thought to the problem of soil fertility and cultivation.

In March 1806, Paterson was willing to admit that York Town was a most unsuitable site and, accordingly, he moved his headquarters to the present site of Launceston.

Paterson, before setting out on his expedition, had been involved in an argument as to his status, but Governor King had resolved the matter by dividing Tasmania at the 42° parallel and making Collins and Paterson sovereign in their respective halves, but subordinate to him as Governor.

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